

THE HALE VETERINARY GROUP

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Strangles

With the increase in number of horses and frequency of their movements around the country, strangles is a constant worry. Strangles is a bacterial infection, usually affecting the glands around the throat, causing a range of respiratory problems, high temperature and abscesses. In some horses the symptoms are very mild or even non-existent. Most horses survive the infection but may be off work for some time. Occasionally the disease gets into the chest or elsewhere (“bastard strangles”) causing a much more serious illness. Some horses remain carriers of the disease after recovery, sometimes for many months, and even those that show no symptoms but have come into contact with the disease can become carriers. It is a very contagious disease, spread by direct or indirect contact with affected cases or carriers. The bacteria can survive in the environment for a few days, especially in damp conditions. Communal drinking troughs can be a source of infection, for example, and people can spread the bacteria around on clothes, hands and hair.

If an outbreak occurs on a yard here are some guidelines to help limit its effects and prevent it from spreading beyond the yard:

- Affected animals should be kept isolated from healthy ones.
- People looking after the affected cases should ensure that they change their clothes and wash thoroughly (including hair) before having contact with healthy horses.
- *All* horses in the yard should be considered to be infected until proven otherwise to prevent spread to other horses outside the yard.
- Owners and visitors to the yard should act responsibly when in contact with horses outside the yard.
- Areas that have been exposed to the infection should be cleaned, disinfected and allowed to dry out before being used by horses again.

Precautions need to be taken to ensure that the disease does not continue after the outbreak has run its course. The symptoms can be mild or non-existent in spite of exposure and apparently healthy horses can become carriers.

- All horses in the yard should have blood samples taken at some stage to establish which animals have been in contact. This would normally be done about three weeks after the outbreak has run its course and no new cases are arising to allow time for contact horses to show an immune response in the blood sample (the incubation period is up to two weeks).
- All horses that have been affected or that have a positive blood sample should have sample taken from their guttural pouches (where the bacteria can hide) to confirm whether or not they are carriers. This is done using an endoscope, under sedation if necessary.
- If carrier horses are identified, they will have their guttural pouches medicated with antibiotics to kill off the infection and, ideally, are sampled again after a few days to ensure the treatment has been successful.

To prevent strangles being brought onto a yard a good policy is to isolate any new horse until a blood sample can be taken confirming that the horse has not had contact with the disease. If the sample comes up positive then a guttural pouch wash should be taken to ensure the horse is not a carrier before it is allowed out of quarantine. In an ideal world, all this would be done before the horse is moved onto the yard.

As in all things, prevention is better than cure, so good hygiene, sensible precautions and a blood test are your best friends in controlling the spread of this pernicious disease.